



ESPACIO, TIEMPO Y FORMA

AÑO 2021
ISSN 1131-768X
E-ISSN 2340-1400

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SERIE IV HISTORIA MODERNA
REVISTA DE LA FACULTAD DE GEOGRAFÍA E HISTORIA

UNED





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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5944/etfv.34.2021>



UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DE EDUCACIÓN A DISTANCIA

La revista *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma* (siglas recomendadas: ETF), de la Facultad de Geografía e Historia de la UNED, que inició su publicación el año 1988, está organizada de la siguiente forma:

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UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DE EDUCACIÓN A DISTANCIA
Madrid, 2021

SERIE IV · HISTORIA MODERNA N.º 34, 2021

ISSN 1131-768X · E-ISSN 2340-1400

DEPÓSITO LEGAL
M-21.037-1988

URL

ETF IV · HISTORIA MODERNA · <http://revistas.uned.es/index.php/ETFIV>

DISEÑO Y COMPOSICIÓN

Carmen Chincoa Gallardo · <http://www.laurisilva.net/cch>

Impreso en España · Printed in Spain



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TALLER DE HISTORIOGRAFÍA · HISTORIOGRAPHY WORKSHOP

RESEÑAS · BOOK REVIEW

Commentary to Tatiana Seijas' review of *The Atlantic World and the Manila Galleons: Circulation, Market, and Consumption of Asian Goods in the Spanish Empire* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2019. 258 pp.)

José Luis Gasch Tomas¹

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5944/etfiv.34.2021.31184>

Knowledge, including scientific knowledge in social sciences and humanities, is the result of individual and collective work. This is the reason why researchers debate in conferences, meetings and journals. The following text is a short commentary and reply to the review written by Tatiana Seijas in *New West Indian Guide* (94, 2020) about my book *The Atlantic World and the Manila Galleons: Circulation, Market, and Consumption of Asian Goods in the Spanish Empire* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2019. 258 pp.). I would like to thank Tatiana Seijas for taking the time to write a review of the book's content.

(I) In the first lines of the review, Seijas points out that «Chapter 2 is vaguely about 'Asian goods' becoming 'Asian commodities in the Spanish Empire' and that «this chapter corroborates historical fact with piecemeal examples». As stated in the book, the chapter is more than this sentence, which is the title of the chapter. From an economic and anthropological perspective, consumption history has been devoted to the mechanisms through which goods were commoditised and how markets were formed during the early modern and the modern period. Chapter 2 of the book sheds light on these mechanisms in the early modern era by using Chinese silk and porcelain and Japanese pieces of furniture, among other Asian goods, in New Spain and Castile as a case study. The chapter makes a concrete methodological and empirical proposal – it analyses the circulation of those goods as gifts and products shipped under order across family and socio-professional networks from Manila to Seville, which revealed Asian goods to potential consumers before there was a market for them, and their retailing in New Spain, which shaped such a new market. These are not piecemeal examples, but a case study to answer questions raised in consumption history.

(II) According to Seijas, «the volume of trade across the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans grew from the 1580s to the 1630s and decreased afterwards in a connected manner. This claim follows an outdated Eurocentric argument maintaining that Spain experienced an economic 'crisis' in the seventeenth century that shaped global commerce. Herbert Klein and others have repeatedly shown that there is no quantitative evidence for this assertion. The viceroalties of New Spain and Peru enjoyed relative economic stability throughout the period in question». The reviewer is correct. In fact, readers can find (pages 76 to 80 of the book) a full explanation of exactly what Seijas states, although she seemingly overlooks it. Readers can find in the book a critique to the mentioned Eurocentric argument based upon

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the well-known contributions by Herbert S. Klein and others. In the mentioned pages, the book criticises the idea of Castile's crisis in its European context (p. 76); it emphasises that many authors have pointed out that the seventeenth-century crisis in the Americas was neither a crisis nor a moment of stagnation but rather a period of economic change, while others have stressed that there was economic growth in colonial America during the seventeenth century (p. 77); and it explains that the fall of transatlantic trade in reality was not such, but «that seeming crisis of trade (was) rather a reflection of the growing participation in the Spanish American trade of traders from northwestern and other European countries», because «although tax collection records of seventeenth-century Spanish institutions indicate a decline in Atlantic trade, in reality this was a diversion of such trade toward northern Europe» (p. 78). The apparent decline of the trans-Pacific trade is interpreted in these same terms (p. 80). Readers will find that references to this interpretation are based on contributions by Ruggiero Romano, Herbert S. Klein (and John TePaske), Michel Morineau, Bartolomé Yun-Casalilla, I. A. A. Thompson and José M. Oliva Melgar, among others, including the most recent contributions of Jeremy Baskes, Regina Grafe and Alejandra Irigoin.

(III) «The 'Atlantic World' of this book has no Caribbean, and its capital is Seville». Seijas is correct. The book barely focuses on the Caribbean, its importance in historical processes such as trade slave, slavery and plantation economy, among other topics of the Atlantic World, notwithstanding. *The Atlantic World and the Manila Galleons* does not deal with the Caribbean because given the limits of any research entailing sources in different parts of the world, research decisions had to be made according to methodological criteria; see the introduction of the book for methodology.

Asian products circulated across merchant and family networks whose main hubs were Manila, Acapulco, Mexico City, Puebla, Veracruz and Seville. In fact, if I had had the time and chance to include any other area, Lima would have had more priority than the Caribbean because of the significance of Peruvian traders in the Manila galleons trade – via contraband – and the role of silver from the mines of Potosí in financing transpacific trade.

«Its capital is Seville» (*sic*). The book does not intend to establish any Atlantic capital; on the contrary, it stresses the Atlantic World as a polycentric arena with many centres connected to other parts of the globe. Seville, alongside Manila in southeast Asia, Mexico City between the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans, and Veracruz on the Atlantic Ocean, played a role in the transmission of Chinese silk and porcelain, Japanese pieces of furniture and other Asian goods to Castile because of a crucial reason – Seville had the monopoly of transatlantic trade on the Iberian side of the Spanish empire. It goes without saying that Seville was one of the most important *entrepôts* of the Atlantic World, alongside other cities such as Lisbon, London, Antwerp, Amsterdam, Havana, Portobelo and Veracruz, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

(IV) «The workings of the Manila Galleon are vague». Readers can evaluate whether, despite the lack of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century primary sources about the Manila Galleon, this statement is accurate after reading the parts of the book devoted to the role of New Spanish merchants in the trade and commoditisation of Asian

manufactured goods (chapter 2); the transformation of the Manila's colonial economy from commercial agriculture to the Manila Galleon – international trade – followed by the struggles among the colonial elites of Manila (chapter 3); and, especially, the mechanisms that traders used to manage the Manila Galleon trade, which I study using commercial letters of Mexican merchants and their agents in Manila, and its impact on the imperial power games resulting in institutional changes in New Spain (chapter 4).

(V) «Scholars not cited in the book such as Elizabeth Leffeldt and Meha Priyadarshini have published on the topic of consumption and self-fashioning in more fruitful ways». Scholars dealing with similar topics are a common and wonderful source of scientific enrichment. Unfortunately, I did not come across Elizabeth Leffeldt's and Meha Priyadarshini's work on Chinese porcelain – the latter was published at the same time as *The Atlantic World and the Manila Galleons*. Priyadarshini's work is excellent, and it presents differences with mine. Whereas her work focuses on the production of Chinese porcelain and its material culture in New Spain, *The Atlantic World and the Manila Galleons* comparatively embraces the impact of several Asian goods in New Spain and Castile. She does not raise the same questions as my book but focuses on a single product – porcelain. Her approach is more based on material culture, and she does not deal with issues related to the formation of markets and the political economy of the Spanish empire. In other words, both researchers deal with different issues and share some common topics. We are not the only ones. Other scholars have also recently written in a very prolific way about the Manila galleons, Asian material culture and its role in culturally shaping identities in New Spain – and Castile – such as María Bonta de la Pezuela, Gustavo Curiel, Teresa Canepa and Cinta Krahe, among others. The Manila Galleon is a productive field that many researchers are dealing with, to shed light on issues related to international trade, consumption, material culture, the political economy of empires, globalisation, colonial societies and the history of science and technology. Fortunately, this reality is not a competition about being «fruitful», but ongoing science.



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